

### The changing dynamics of the Kurdish question

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# SWP Comment

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## The Changing Dynamics of the Kurdish Question

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The Kurds in the Middle East have become significant political and military actors in the context of the fight against IS. One of the most important consequences of this situation has been the transformation of the Kurdish Question. Frustrated with the largely fruitless efforts to achieve equal rights and equal political footing in the countries where they reside, Kurdish parties have tended to change their perceptions and strategies. There is a remarkable shift under way: from the fight for “justice, freedom and equality inside a given nation state” to the “defence of Kurdistan” as a political territory. Therefore, a fragmented approach towards the Kurdish Question as a domestic issue of national concern is not realistic anymore. Developments in the Kurdish landscape require a review of the conventional stance and a comprehensive solution in order to balance competing interests and cope with the evolving challenges in the Middle East.

The cross-border nature of the Arab Spring that motivated the masses, above all else, weakened the positions of power centres vis-à-vis their peripheries, where disadvantaged groups live who have been subordinated for a long time by authoritarian regimes. The Kurdish parties were the most – if not the only – well-prepared groups in the peripheries of imploding nation-states in the Middle East. Their political and military organisations responded to the region-wide demand for change in the status quo, which was characterised by the widespread repression of free speech, human rights abuses, economic mismanagement, and corruption.

### The Rise and Fall of the “Kurdish Moment”

In this context, the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) and the role that the Kurdish fighters have played in the struggle against the IS have provided an invaluable opportunity for Kurdish political actors. Kurdish leaders were finally on the political scene acting in the name of the Kurdish people, with political and military support coming from the United States as well as some European states. Thus, it was a historic “Kurdish moment” seemingly enabling the Kurds to get rid of denial, subordination, and coercion.



Nevertheless, despite the inflexible stance of international actors and the risks stemming from the objections of regional actors such as Turkey and Iran, the Kurds in Iraq staged a referendum for independence. Tens of thousands of Kurds from four parts of Kurdistan rallied to construct an autonomous region in Syria. Armed conflict broke out once again following a two-year-long peace negotiation process in Turkey. In Iran, Kurdish actors decided to return to armed struggle after two decades of non-violence.

However, the initial tally of such efforts demonstrated that, for the Kurdish people in the Middle East, the losses turned out to be greater than the gains.

### **The Consequences of the Referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan**

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been the most remarkable achievement of the Kurds in the Middle East. When the Iraqi army withdrew in the face of IS attacks in 2014, this achievement was boosted by gaining *de facto* jurisdiction over disputed areas defined by Article 140 of the Constitution of Iraq. Given this, the primary goal of the referendum for independence from Iraq in 2017 was indeed to expand the *de jure* boundaries of the KRG through the Diyala, Nineveh, and Kirkuk provinces in disputed areas.

The consequence, however, has been a territorially narrowed as well as politically and militarily weakened KRG. The destruction in disputed areas is almost irreparable. KRG forces lost 40 per cent of the territory it previously held. With Baghdad's military control of Kirkuk, the export of 300,000 barrels of oil per day from the KRG to Turkey came to an end. In disputed areas, the Iraqi government removed Kurdish officials from local administrative posts and security-related positions. Meanwhile, just in the province of Kirkuk, 30,000 Kurds lost their homes. The KRG presidency, which was recognised internationally as the legitimate representative of the Kurds, was suspended, and the KRG had to re-engage with

Baghdad via two separate political power domains, namely Arbil and Sulaimaniya.

Ultimately, a year after the referendum, political trauma remains for the Iraqi Kurds and the Kurdish parties. In the eyes of most people in Iraqi Kurdistan, the KRG experience is over, but no one knows what comes next. The weak power-sharing arrangement between the two prominent Kurdish parties – namely the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – has completely deteriorated; the former is about to be marginalised in Baghdad while the latter is losing political ground in the KRG. Repercussions from the recently held parliamentary elections in Iraq and the parliamentary elections in the KRG demonstrate that reconciliation is unlikely. On the other hand, the international support that the Kurds in Iraq are searching for in order to recover is apparently limited, with the acknowledgement of the Kurds being “good fighters”, but nothing more. The international actors' preference for the reconstruction of Iraq's territorial integrity is evident.

### **The Kurds in Syria: The Shift of the “Rojava Revolution” to North Syria**

The ongoing process for establishing an autonomous Kurdish region (Rojava) in Syria, like the KRG, is in turmoil. The Kurdish-ruled areas are suffering because of Turkish military intervention beyond its borders. One of the three cantons ruled by the Kurds in Syria, Afrin, is already back in the hands of Turkey-backed Syrian opposition groups. The remaining two areas are under threat from both Turkish attacks as well as the expanding control of the Bashar al-Assad regime throughout northern Syria. It is debatable whether the hesitant presence of the United States on the eastern banks of the Euphrates River would help Kurdish self-rule to survive.

In this sense, the “Rojava Revolution” is far from meeting the expectations of the Kurds following seven years of war and the

death of almost 10,000 Kurdish fighters. Meanwhile the use of the denomination “Rojava” has already given way to the term “North Syria”, with an emphasis on the east of the Euphrates River. Finally, the US-led coalition’s distinction between the People’s Protection Units (YPG), as a legitimate local force, and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), as a terrorist organisation, tends to validate the Turkish argument that portrays the two groups as one terrorist organisation. As a result, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) cannot participate in the Syrian peace process, either in Geneva or in Astana.

## **Collapse of the Peace Process in Turkey**

The peace process that began in 2013 between Turkey and the PKK turned into a destructive war in just two years. Turkey launched an intensive military offensive, not only against the PKK bases in the mountains, but also against the PKK-affiliated Kurdish urban militias in the cities. In the last four years, the Kurds in Turkey as a whole have experienced harsh and brutal measures based on the state of emergency rule.

During the course of this escalation, the government has forcibly displaced about 500,000 people and destroyed the homes of 255,000 people. The pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) saw its ousting from the political scene through the imprisonment of thousands of its members, including its co-chairs and parliamentarians. In addition, the government removed 93 elected mayors in Kurdish provinces and took direct control of the municipalities by appointing state commissioners. Despite this suppression, the HDP finally succeeded in crossing the threshold during parliamentary elections held in June 2018. However, considering the overall political situation in the newly constituted presidential system of Turkey, no one expects a normalisation process to take place soon in the Kurdish areas.

## **Escalation of Repression in Iranian Kurdistan**

Behind the walls of the Islamist revolutionary regime in Iran, Iranian Kurdistan had been relatively quiet since the mid-1990s. The Kurdish political parties could only operate in exile, mainly in Iraqi Kurdistan. For decades, they were far from being able to mobilise the masses in Iranian Kurdistan. Meanwhile, Kurdish activists in Iran became more influential in the political sphere, as experienced during the Green Movement in 2009. In the wake of the Arab Spring, this influence increased through the rise of nation-wide demonstrations in Iran. When 25-year-old Kurdish woman Farinaz Khosrawani died in 2015 while trying to escape a sexual assault by an Iranian military officer, unprecedented protests spread across Iranian Kurdistan.

It was during this time in 2015 that the Iranian Kurdish parties decided to return to armed struggle. The response of the Iranian regime was to increase levels of repression. Kurdish activists received severe sentences, and the number of death sentences rose sharply. There are reports of 135 Kurds being executed in Iran just between October 2016 and October 2017. Furthermore, Iran killed 14 members of Iranian Kurdish parties in a rocket attack on their headquarters in Iraqi Kurdistan.

## **A Deadlock**

A peaceful solution to the Kurdish Question on the level of existing nation-states is evidently not an achievable target in the near future. The states in question are far from turning into democracies. The Iranian regime remains standing, despite all efforts to topple it; the reconstruction of Iraq is not progressing; the Assad regime seems poised to survive; and even Turkey — a NATO member and still an EU candidate country — has moved far ahead on its path towards autocracy.

Moreover, the response of Western countries to the Arab Spring, for instance in

Egypt and in Syria, has demonstrated that – whatever the extent of massacres, dictatorships, and violations of human rights – safeguarding the political borders and the territorial integrity of the states is considered the foremost priority.

Once the IS threat was contained, the Kurds were called upon to retreat within the existing national boundaries, as in the cases of Iraq and Syria. However, international actors were silent when the Iranian-backed militia forces took control in disputed areas of Iraq in October 2017 and Turkey invaded Afrin in January 2018.

In view of such circumstances, a deadlock in the Kurdish Question is more likely than any fast solution. A closer look at the changing dynamics of the Kurdish Question, however, indicates that such a deadlock might soon pose serious new challenges in the Middle East.

## **The Changing Dynamics**

Traditionally, international actors treated the Kurdish Question as a domestic issue of the states in the region where the Kurdish people reside, namely Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Such a perception was shaped during the Cold War era, when Western powers supported the central authorities of these states and helped them control the political borders. Drawing a sharp distinction between domestic and foreign policies, the Kurdish Question remained contained within national boundaries and was regarded only as a security issue of the individual nation-states.

As a result, the Kurds found themselves socially, economically, and culturally disconnected from one another, while the Kurdish identity was reshaped and differentiated in its relation to the dominant nationalist projects of the constituent states. Furthermore, the Kurdish national movements that emerged as a reaction to these nationalist projects developed in close dependency with the geopolitical fragmentation of Kurdistan. Given the linguistic and religious differences, however, this frag-

mentation appeared to represent the very nature of Kurdish society itself. So it was easy to emphasise the political differences among the Kurds and to legitimise the conceptualisation of the Kurdish Question as being merely a domestic issue of the respective nation-state. In this sense, Kurds turned into vulnerable minority groups in the respective nation-states, rather than being a nation unto itself. Kurdistan figured as a geo-cultural term without any political reference to Kurdish aspirations.

This state of affairs, however, has changed over the course of recent decades. It was first the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq in 1992, and then the emergence of Kurdish rule in northern Syria by 2012 that triggered the cross-border mobilisation of the Kurds. They have been reconnected and reorganised due to four main elements: immigration, armed struggle, border trade/business, and the media. Migration reconstructed the strictly separated former identities of Kurds from different nation-states into one Kurdish identity, with an emphasis on common ethnicity.

Armed-struggle has weakened ideological differences in the name of the defence of Kurdistan. Enhanced cross-border trade and business has allowed for the capitalisation of transborder kinship and tribal boundaries and helped new interest groups to emerge. More than one hundred TV channels as well as various radio stations and social networks have enabled the Kurds of different states to communicate with each other, despite difficulties due to linguistic differences.

## **The Emergence of Kurdistan As a Political Territory and the Unity of the Kurds**

Thus, it is fair to claim that the Kurdish Question is being reshaped in a fluid regional context that transcends national boundaries. Today, the Kurdish struggle for “justice, equality, freedom” has obviously switched to the “defence of Kurdistan”. A

lack of peaceful solutions — besides the restrictions imposed by central authorities — encourages bottom-up changes that favour separation rather than integration.

In recent decades, we have observed the emergence of Kurdistan as a political term, with a greater emphasis on the Kurdish homeland, in both discourse and practice. Unlike in the past, for instance, Turkish Kurds consider themselves as *Kurdi Bakuri* (Kurds from northern Kurdistan) and Iraqi Kurds as *Kurdi Basuri* (Kurds from southern Kurdistan). The Kurdish people's political orientation today is concentrated on the Kurdistan theatre more than ever. Accordingly, the most popular topic of today's Kurdish agenda is the "unity of the Kurds", but not the political developments in the countries where they reside.

However, the Kurdish political parties' responses to these newly emerging expectations have been far from adequate. They could hardly unite during the fight against IS and, soon after, were once again trapped in rivalries. In this sense, the loss of Kirkuk, in particular, after the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan on 16 October 2017 constituted a turning point. Regardless of their party affiliations, the vast majority of Kurdish people accused the Kurdish political actors for that failure, rather than the regional and international actors. According to many, the main reason for the failure was the lack of unity among the Kurdish parties.

Such a perception gained strength when the Turkish army invaded Afrin a couple of months after the loss of Kirkuk. The PYD's obstinate dominance over all other Kurdish parties in Syrian Kurdistan, in the end, weakened the legitimacy of Kurdish rule and paved the way for Turkey's interference via Syrian opposition groups, which had more or less cooperated with these Kurdish parties since the civil war erupted in Syria.

Another case was the withdrawal of all Kurdish forces from Sinjar, a Yazidi-populated district in northern Iraq on the Syrian border. Sinjar was under de facto control of the KRG before the IS emerged. When the IS attacked Sinjar in 2014, however, the KRG withdrew its troops. The KRG was only

able to return to Sinjar by cooperating with the YPG and other PKK-affiliated groups, which launched a prompt rescue operation for the Yazidis in the face of IS assaults. Afterwards, the KDP and the PKK coordinated to liberate Sinjar in 2015. Since then, Sinjar has become a symbol of co-existence between Peshmarga and the Guerilla connection between south and west Kurdistan. However, the tide soon turned in Sinjar as the Kurdish parties got into a power struggle on how to rule the city. The consequence was the militarisation of everyday life in Sinjar while the Yazidis distanced themselves from Kurdish parties in order to secure their own interests apart from intra-Kurdish conflicts. In the end, both the KDP and the PKK forces withdrew, and the city of Sinjar fell into the hands of Baghdad in late 2017.

It is true that different factors and actors have played crucial roles in all of these cases. The overall impact of those failures on Kurdish public opinion, however, is that the Kurdish parties have prioritised their own interests rather than the interests of the Kurdish people, and Kurdistan as a whole. Nevertheless, in recent elections, there have been remarkably lower turnouts in the Kurdish regions. For instance, a Kurdish voter who expressed his unwillingness to vote in the Kurdistan parliamentary election said on 30 September: "I only ever voted in the referendum because that was for Kurdistan. These elections are for the parties, not for Kurdistan."

On the other hand, both the voters who voted in the parliamentary elections in Iraq and the KRG rewarded the KDP vis-à-vis other Kurdish parties. Whereas the number of votes for the PUK, for instance, decreased and the other parties did not achieve remarkable successes, the KDP increased its vote share. Such a result simply indicates that, despite the negative results, the majority of Kurdish voters did not punish the KDP, who had, in fact, championed the independence referendum. On the contrary, the voters showed less interest in the parties that opposed the independence of the KRG from Iraq.

Even so, it is hard to say that the KDP is more powerful than it was one year ago. A lack of unity in Kurdish politics apparently undermines the legitimacy of the power that any party gains via elections or military success. Nevertheless, after the parliamentary elections in the KRG, the KDP will likely partner with the PUK, in particular, in order to consolidate unity once again in the KRG — although the KDP could easily form the government with the support of the 11 seats designated to minority groups in the KRG Parliament. On the other hand, the dominant pro-Kurdish party in Turkey has already declared that it would look to build an alliance with the Kurdish parties for the local elections in March 2019.

According to a Peshmerga commander, if the Kurdish parties did not clash with each other during recent developments, it was mainly due to armed groups not being willing to do so. Indeed, Kurdish armed groups have not clashed since the early 2000s. Such a *modus vivendi* was achieved following a power-sharing agreement brokered by the Kurdish parties, namely the KDP, the PUK, and the PKK, who committed not to interfere in the others' political and military spheres of influence. However, this state of affairs has evidently become invalid since the emergence of the IS in 2014. All Kurdish parties have expanded their spheres of influence by building new alliances with regional and international actors while their armed groups have had to face off against each other on many occasions. On these occasions, however, all groups have avoided clashes — except one case in Sinjar in March 2017 — and repeatedly assured followers that the Kurdish-Kurdish fight was over.

Such a stance, in fact, relies on two new dynamics. Despite their strong affiliation with a specific Kurdish party, the Kurdish armed groups have become more diverse in terms of their members' origins. Unlike in the past, for instance, the number of Kurds outside of Iraqi Kurdistan in the KRG forces has notably increased. At present, there are thousands of Syrian Kurdish fighters, called *Leshkeri Roj*, under the command of the KDP,

whereas KRG Special Forces, *Zerevani*, basically consist of ex-PKK fighters who are originally from Turkey. This is also true for the armed groups affiliated with the PKK — this group already constitutes the most diverse Kurdish armed group, as it has operated in four parts of Kurdistan for decades. Accordingly, any Kurdish fighter from any Kurdish armed group in the current context simply claims that he or she “fights for Kurdistan” and gives no significant reference to a geographical region or political party. In this sense, it is fair to say that the “defence of Kurdistan” as a common cause prevents clashes among the Kurdish parties while providing a common ground for co-existence as well.

In sum, the Kurdish national cause evidently lacks the necessary unity or military and political capacity to win any power struggle over Kurdistan territory. However, it is also a fact that there is no other national and/or international offer that could suppress a bottom-up mobilisation of the Kurdish national awakening. In this sense, it will not be easy to roll back the Kurds within national boundaries, especially when the states in question are either imploding or too fragile to exert dominance over Kurdish settled areas.

## The Role of the West

Against the backdrop of these developments, the question arises as to whether the fragmented approach to the Kurdish Question as a domestic issue of nation-states can still be the sole approach. Clearly, it is hard to expect the West to play a decisive role in the context of the Kurdish Question today when Western countries do not identify a “common threat” in the Middle East after the defeat of the IS. Even if they came to a shared risk-evaluation, the decline of transatlantic relations under President Donald Trump thwarts any possibility of seeing eye to eye on Iran, Turkey, or Russia.

Moreover, the new motto of US foreign policy, “America First”, followed by the imperative of “no boots on the ground”,



indicates that the American military presence is about to decline in the Middle East. The United States tends to limit its role to “backing” allies instead of engaging in military interventions. However, Washington lacks the support of its “strategic allies” in the region for this approach.

The tense relationship between the United States and Turkey, in particular, is eroding their alliance and is prone to lead to a series of crises. Despite the claim that US support for the Kurdish fighters in Syria was the main driver for the tense relations, the case of Pastor Andrew Brunson has recently shed light on the fact that the problem is deeper and has developed to a degree where sentences such as “The White House has decided to give up on Turkey as an ally” are formulated. The most visible signs of such escalation are the American sanctions that have exacerbated the economic crisis in Turkey. Turkey’s insistence on buying an S-400 surface-to-air missile system from Russia additionally undermines the possibility of a recovery following the release of Pastor Brunson. Overall, there are indicators that Turkey might close ranks with Russia and Iran.

In such circumstances, one could argue that the newly emerging alliance between Saudi Arabia and Israel as regional partners of the United States could replace the strategic alliance with Turkey and function as an efficient barrier against Iranian expansion in the Middle East. The initial signs, however, suggest that Kurdish political actors are likely to be the beneficiaries of this newly emerging Saudi Arabia – Israel – US alliance. Thus far, neither the Saudis nor the Israelis have objected to Kurdish aspirations. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has already committed \$100 million for the “stabilisation projects” in the areas held by the Kurdish dominated Syrian Democratic Council.

In the absence of Turkey, in particular, on the side of the United States, there is no doubt that Kurdish political actors in Iraq would be the other beneficiaries of the US

anti-Iran policy. First, the Iraqi Kurds could reduce their dependence on Turkish economic and military support. Second, it would help Kurdish political actors to cooperate with the Sunnis of Iraq in order to mitigate the Shia dominance in both Kurdistan and disputed areas.

Furthermore, despite their vulnerabilities, the Kurdish political parties still hold significant positions in the Middle East as the major local powers in the Kurdish-populated areas. Without the consent of the Kurdish political parties, it will be difficult to progress with the reconstruction of – or re-stabilisation in – Iraq and Syria. The Kurdish political parties may not have the capacity to unite, but they have the capacity to upend domestic and regional balances. This is also true for the Kurdish parties in Turkey and Iran. In both cases, the control of central authorities over Kurdish-populated areas relies on forces that undermine their legitimacy and strengthen the Kurdish parties’ role as representatives of the Kurdish will.

In this context, the “Kurdish Moment” is likely to be resurrected if there is a continued power vacuum due to shifting alliances in the Middle East. European countries are apparently neither prepared nor willing to fill the vacuum. It is also doubtful whether Russia has the capacity to invest more in the Middle East.

In sum, it is obvious that the course of these developments urgently require an update of the Western approach towards the Kurdish Question in order to cope with the evolving regional and geopolitical challenges in the Middle East. Correspondingly, both the internal and external dynamics of the Kurdish Question are also evolving. It is unrealistic to try to turn back the clock in the Middle East.

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